

THE WORLD'S LEADING MYSTERY MAGAZINE

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a **NEW** short story by

**JACK RITCHIE**

*Who was Jack the Ripper? What was his true identity? At long last the secret is revealed . . .*

*The author titled this story "The Secret Smile." We thought of "Eyewitness" or "The Great Secret" or "The Man in the Hansom Cab." But there is only one perfect title . . .*

## A CASE OF IDENTITY

by **JACK RITCHIE**

I have discovered the true identity of Jack the Ripper. I now know his very name.

I saw him commit his first murder and I would, of course, have recognized him if I had ever seen him again. But it was not until a month ago that I could actually put a name to that face.

Yes, I was there that dreadful night, crouched in the darkness of a nearby doorway, not daring to move and hardly daring to breathe. If he had been aware that I had just witnessed the murder, I have no doubt at all that he would have instantly pounced upon me and slashed me to ribbons.

And so, horrified, I had watched him at his grisly work and I had done nothing. Nothing. She had died swiftly, poor woman. Yes, instantly quite beyond my help or that of anyone else. What had happened to her afterward, she could not have felt.

She had been his first victim.

What had I been doing in that district of Whitechapel at that time of night?

Even today I blush at the thought of my mission. But I had been a young subaltern gazetted for immediate service in India and I was

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due to leave England the next day. There existed the possibility that I might not see an English woman again in years.

And so I had been prowling the neighborhood in mufti, seeking companionship. I had been without success, however, for these women of the streets had all seemed so gross, so crude, that I had actually been repelled.

At last, tiring of the futile search for something which perhaps could not really be found, I had stepped into a doorway to light a cigar.

I was searching my pockets for a match, when I saw the woman coming up the alleyway. I retreated into the shadows, not wishing for any further contact with these creatures, and waited for her to pass.

As she did so, another figure appeared at the end of the short lane. The woman stopped when she reached him and they exchanged a few words, of which I could make out only a murmur. And then suddenly his arm raised and the knife flashed. She had no time even to scream. And then the Ripper went to work over the body.

I do possess a certain physical courage. I have since even been mentioned in dispatches. This, however, was quite a different matter. So sudden. So shocking. So horrible that I had been literally frozen to the spot.

No, I could never forget that man's face, so ghastly pale in the shaft of moonlight. Those mad eyes.

I had watched him finish his terrible deed, and after he had disappeared into the darkness of the night, I too fled the scene.

My first natural impulse had been to find a policeman immediately, but as I hurried through the streets, I began to wonder if that was at all wise.

What good would the police be to the poor woman now?

And if I reported the murder, I would be questioned. Yes, surely at least that. The police would want to know what I had been doing in the neighbourhood at that time of night.

And how would I answer them? With a lie? With the truth?

I had been reared by a family of the highest moral principles. I was a favourite son of whom much was expected, both in my immediate behaviour and in my future career.

Yes, I would be asked questions and I would have to provide the police with answers. If I tried to be evasive, to tell lies, perhaps they might even suspect *me* of the crime.

What purpose would it really serve for me to go to the police? I

could provide them with a description of the killer, yes. But it could fit thousands of men in this London of 4,000,000 souls.

Perhaps *if* the murderer was ever picked up by the police, *then* I might come forward to identify him. But why should I reveal myself now when it might serve no purpose at all except to ruin me?

I saw a constable ahead. I nodded to him as we passed and continued on to my hotel.

The next morning, I was off on a packet to India.

It was on that sub-continent that I learned from weeks-old newspapers that the atrocity I had witnessed had been but the first in a series of murders and mutilations, and that the murderer continued to remain at large, leaving the police completely baffled.

Would it have made any difference if I had known at the time of the first murder that there would be others? Would I have gone to the police regardless of the risk to my own future? I do not know.

I had been appalled to learn of the subsequent crimes, of course. Yet I had reasoned what possible good could I, in India, do if I came forward now with no more than a general description of the murderer? And if the truth came out that I had stood cowering in that doorway, I would certainly be forced to resign my commission.

So once again I yielded to expediency and remained silent.

There were wild rumours as to the identity of Jack the Ripper. It was suggested that he might be a man of some medical knowledge. Others advanced the theory that he might even be of royal blood.

That he was a man of literacy had been obvious in the taunting letters he had written to the authorities. He was certainly not some illiterate madman of the slums.

If the police had actually arrested a suspect and brought him to trial, would I finally have come forward to confirm his guilt? Or his innocence? I do not even dare think about that.

But then the killings stopped.

I was enormously relieved, of course. And along with millions of others I wondered why. Had the Ripper himself died? Perhaps even by his own hand? Had he been committed to some madhouse by people who did not even know that he was Jack the Ripper?

We, in this latter half of the Nineteenth Century, are just beginning to uncover the dark impulses of the mind which compel a man to do the things he does. Was it even possible that Jack had suddenly, startlingly, wakened to the enormity of his crimes? Was he now hiding somewhere, a torn wretched man fighting madness and remorse?

Yes, these were my speculations as the months passed. Years. And I, as much as possible, tried to keep the thought of Jack the Ripper out of my mind.

It was an exciting life for a young officer on the frontier, and yet there were also long periods of utter boredom which I spent lolling about in my quarters reading well-worn and dated issues of newspapers and magazines from England.

I was particularly attracted to the issues of one magazine, *The Strand*. I read the articles, the tales, the adventures, with a fascination that surprised me. It was some time before I realised that it was not the stories themselves which drew me to the pages, it was the illustrations.

I suppose that if the magazine had been illustrated with photographs, I would instantly have realised what it was that so commanded my attention. But they were line drawings. And the artist, capable and talented though he might be, had not quite succeeded in creating true and exact representations. But there were clues here and there in some of the drawings, and they seemed to converge until one day I found myself staring with astonishment and horror at the very features of Jack the Ripper himself.

At first I wondered if my eyes and my mind were playing tricks upon me. Was it possible that my obsession with Jack, spurred by my feelings of guilt, had somehow transferred itself to the pages of the magazine?

This man, this Jack the Ripper, bore a name which was more than well-known in the English-speaking world.

I studied and re-studied dozens of the illustrations and slowly some doubt crept into my mind. Was this man *really* Jack the Ripper? Or was I going mad?

I had to find out. I had to see this man again before I could be certain.

I applied for leave long due me and sailed for England. The seemingly endless voyage finally ended and I debarked. I registered at a hotel, left my bags, and took a hansom cab.

Yes, I knew where I could find Jack the Ripper, *if* he was indeed Jack the Ripper. I knew his very address.

When my cab reached its destination, I was again struck with indecision. I directed the driver to pull ahead and halt at the kerb a door or two beyond.

I had intended to boldly knock upon his door. To be ushered up

into his presence. Yet I had never been quite certain as to what would follow next.

*If* he were Jack the Ripper, would I finally have the courage to denounce him to his face? Tell him that I was finally going to the police with my knowledge?

Or perhaps it would be wiser, after I confirmed in my mind that he *was* Jack the Ripper, merely to appear embarrassed and declare that I must have the wrong address, that I had been looking for someone else.

And *then* should I go to the police?

I wiped my forehead with a handkerchief.

What *proof* did I actually have that he was the Ripper? None whatsoever. It would be my word against his.

He would deny his guilt, of course. One could hardly expect him to do otherwise, could one? And then would not I, in turn, be deemed the madman for daring to accuse such a man of a crime so vile?

Suppose, *suppose* that for some insane reason he *did* choose to confess? Was he perhaps even *hoping* to be found out? Would that not—to his warped mind—represent the very triumph of his career of murder? To reveal himself to the world and in doing so to utterly crush and ruin the reputation of—

I wiped my forehead again.

Should I at least send the police an anonymous letter? But what good would that do? A mere accusation, without proof, and with no one to stand behind it.

There was even the danger that the letter might be traced back to me. No, I could not take the risk of even an anonymous letter.

Besides, what would really be accomplished by revealing the identity of Jack the Ripper now?

After all, he *had* stopped his killings. His victims were dead and long buried. They could not be brought back to life.

Yes, Jack the Ripper had stopped his killing, and I knew *why*.

He had stopped because he had been presented with a new challenge. The killings, the mutilations had ceased to interest him. After all, it had been so easy to outwit the police. To continue the murders would be mere repetition of something already dared. And there always existed the possibility that one might be ingloriously apprehended by some unworthy dolt who might happen upon the scene at the wrong time.

No, the murders were *faits accompli*. They were done with. The past. Now there was a new game afoot. One that could be enjoyed,

relished, *savoured* day after day, year after year. A *continuing* challenge.

And so he had deliberately sought out—

I glanced back up at the windows above the street floor. Was anyone home at the moment? Was there someone behind those curtains watching me? A tall thin man who might be filling his clay pipe with black tobacco from the toe of a Persian slipper?

The front door of the dwelling opened and a stout middle-aged woman appeared. She began shaking the dust out of a small scatter rug.

A hansom cab drew up behind mine and its passenger stepped down.

My heart raced as I recognised him.

Yes! It was Jack the Ripper himself getting out of the hansom!

There could be *no* doubt about it. He was the same man I had seen that dreadful night.

Jack paid off his cabbie. He glanced up at the windows of his lodgings. A faint smile came to his lips.

Then he picked up his little black bag, nodded to the stout woman, and entered 221-B Baker Street to join his friend, that great detective, upstairs in their quarters.

Yes, I know the *true* identity of Jack the Ripper, but I shall reveal it to no man.

I directed my driver to take me back to my hotel.

